

# A Sick Collier

by D H Lawrence

She was too good for him, everybody said. Yet still she did not regret marrying him. He had come courting her when he was only nineteen, and she twenty. He was in build what they call a tight little fellow; short, dark, with a warm colour, and that upright set of the head and chest, that flaunting way in

movement recalling a mating bird, which denotes a body taut and compact with life. Being a good worker he had earned decent money in the mine, and having a good home had saved a little.

She was a cook at "Uplands", a tall, fair girl, very quiet. Having seen her walk down the street, Horsepool

had followed her from a distance. He was taken with her, he did not drink, and he was not lazy. So, although he seemed a bit simple, without much intelligence, but having a sort of physical brightness, she

considered, and accepted him.

When they were married they went to live in Scargill Street, in a highly respectable six-roomed house

which they had furnished between them. The street was built up the side of a long, steep hill. It was narrow and rather tunnel-like. Nevertheless, the back looked out over the adjoining pasture, across a

wide valley of fields and woods, in the bottom of which the mine lay snugly.

He made himself gaffer in his own house. She was unacquainted with a collier's mode of life. They were

married on a Saturday. On the Sunday night he said:

"Set th' table for my breakfast, an' put my pit-things afront o' th' fire. I s'll be gettin' up at ha'ef pas' five.

Tha nedna shift thysen not till when ter likes."

He showed her how to put a newspaper on the table for a cloth. When she demurred:

"I want none o' your white cloths i' th' mornin'. I like ter be able to slobber if I feel like it," he said.

He put before the fire his moleskin trousers, a clean singlet, or sleeveless vest of thick flannel, a pair of

stockings and his pit boots, arranging them all to be warm and ready for morning.

"Now tha sees. That wants doin' ivery night."

Punctually at half past five he left her, without any form of leave-taking, going downstairs in his shirt.

When he arrived home at four o'clock in the afternoon his dinner was ready to be dished up. She was

startled when he came in, a short, sturdy figure, with a face indescribably black and streaked. She stood

before the fire in her white blouse and white apron, a fair girl, the picture of beautiful cleanliness. He

"clommaxed" in, in his heavy boots.

"Well, how 'as ter gone on?" he asked.

"I was ready for you to come home," she replied tenderly. In his black face the whites of his brown eyes

flashed at her.

"An' I wor ready for comin'," he said. He planked his tin bottle and snap-bag on the dresser, took off his

coat and scarf and waistcoat, dragged his arm-chair nearer the fire and sat down.

"Let's ha'e a bit o' dinner, then--I'm about clammed," he said.

"Aren't you goin' to wash yourself first?"

"What am I to wesh mysen for?"

"Well, you can't eat your dinner--"

"Oh, strike a daisy, Missis! Dunna I eat my snap i' th' pit wi'out weshin'?--forced to."

She served the dinner and sat opposite him. His small bullet head was quite black, save for the whites of

his eyes and his scarlet lips. It gave her a queer sensation to see him open his red mouth and bare his white teeth as he ate. His arms and hands were mottled black; his bare, strong neck got a little fairer as

it settled towards his shoulders, reassuring her. There was the faint indescribable odour of the pit in the

room, an odour of damp, exhausted air.

"Why is your vest so black on the shoulders?" she asked.

"My singlet? That's wi' th' watter droppin' on us from th' roof. This is a dry un as I put on afore I come

up. They ha'e gre't clothes-'osses, and' as we change us things, we put 'em on theer ter dry."

When he washed himself, kneeling on the hearth-rug stripped to the waist, she felt afraid of him again.

He was so muscular, he seemed so intent on what he was doing, so intensely himself, like a vigorous animal. And as he stood wiping himself, with his naked breast towards her, she felt rather sick, seeing

his thick arms bulge their muscles.

They were nevertheless very happy. He was at a great pitch of pride because of her. The men in the pit

might chaff him, they might try to entice him away, but nothing could reduce his self-assured pride because of her, nothing could unsettle his almost infantile satisfaction. In the evening he sat in his armchair chattering to her, or listening as she read the newspaper to him. When it was fine, he would go

into the street, squat on his heels as colliers do, with his back against the wall of his parlour, and call to

the passers-by, in greeting, one after another. If no one were passing, he was content just to squat and

smoke, having such a fund of sufficiency and satisfaction in his heart. He was well married.

They had not been wed a year when all Brent and Wellwood's men came out on strike. Willy was in the

Union, so with a pinch they scrambled through. The furniture was not all paid for, and other debts were

incurred. She worried and contrived, he left it to her. But he was a good husband; he gave her all he had.

The men were out fifteen weeks. They had been back just over a year when Willy had an accident in the

mine, tearing his bladder. At the pit head the doctor talked of the hospital. Losing his head entirely, the

young collier raved like a madman, what with pain and fear of hospital.

"Tha s'lt go whoam, Willy, tha s'lt go whoam," the deputy said.

A lad warned the wife to have the bed ready. Without speaking or hesitating she prepared. But when

the ambulance came, and she heard him shout with pain at being moved, she was afraid lest she should

sink down. They carried him in.

"Yo' should 'a' had a bed i' th' parlour, Missis," said the deputy, "then we shouldn'a ha' had to hawkse  
'im upstairs, an' it 'ud 'a' saved your legs."  
But it was too late now. They got him upstairs.  
"They let me lie, Lucy," he was crying, "they let me lie two mortal hours on th' sleck afore they took  
me  
outer th' stall. Th' peen, Lucy, th' peen; oh, Lucy, th' peen, th' peen!"  
"I know th' pain's bad, Willy, I know. But you must try an' bear it a bit."  
"Tha manna carry on in that form, lad, thy missis'll niver be able ter stan' it," said the deputy.  
"I canna 'elp it, it's th' peen, it's th' peen," he cried again. He had never been ill in his life. When he  
had  
smashed a finger he could look at the wound. But this pain came from inside, and terrified him. At  
last  
he was soothed and exhausted.  
It was some time before she could undress him and wash him. He would let no other woman do for  
him,  
having that savage modesty usual in such men.  
For six weeks he was in bed, suffering much pain. The doctors were not quite sure what was the  
matter  
with him, and scarcely knew what to do. He could eat, he did not lose flesh, nor strength, yet the  
pain  
continued, and he could hardly walk at all.  
In the sixth week the men came out in the national strike. He would get up quite early in the  
morning  
and sit by the window. On Wednesday, the second week of the strike, he sat gazing out on the street  
as  
usual, a bullet-headed young man, still vigorous-looking, but with a peculiar expression of hunted  
fear in  
his face.  
"Lucy," he called, "Lucy!"  
She, pale and worn, ran upstairs at his bidding.  
"Gi'e me a han'kercher," he said.  
"Why, you've got one," she replied, coming near.  
"Tha nedna touch me," he cried. Feeling his pocket, he produced a white handkerchief.  
"I non want a white un, gi'e me a red un," he said.  
"An' if anybody comes to see you," she answered, giving him a red handkerchief.  
"Besides," she continued, "you needn't ha' brought me upstairs for that."  
"I b'lieve th' peen's commin' on again," he said, with a little horror in his voice.  
"It isn't, you know, it isn't," she replied. "The doctor says you imagine it's there when it isn't."  
"Canna I feel what's inside me?" he shouted.  
"There's a traction-engine coming downhill," she said. "That'll scatter them. I'll just go an' finish your  
pudding."  
She left him. The traction-engine went by, shaking the houses. Then the street was quiet, save for  
the  
men. A gang of youths from fifteen to twenty-five years old were playing marbles in the middle of  
the  
road. Other little groups of men were playing on the pavement. The street was gloomy. Willy could  
hear  
the endless calling and shouting of men's voices.  
"Tha'rt skinchin'!"  
"I arena!"

"Come 'ere with that blood-alley."

"Swop us four for't."

"Shonna, gie's hold on't."

He wanted to be out, he wanted to be playing marbles. The pain had weakened his mind, so that he hardly knew any self-control.

Presently another gang of men lounged up the street. It was pay morning. The Union was paying the men in the Primitive Chapel. They were returning with their half-sovereigns.

"Sorry!" bawled a voice. "Sorry!"

The word is a form of address, corruption probably of 'Sirrah'. Willy started almost out of his chair.

"Sorry!" again bawled a great voice. "Art goin' wi' me to see Notts play Villa?"

Many of the marble players started up.

"What time is it? There's no treens, we s'll ha'e ter walk."

The street was alive with men.

"Who's goin' ter Nottingham ter see th' match?" shouted the same big voice. A very large, tipsy man, with his cap over his eyes, was calling.

"Com' on--aye, com' on!" came many voices. The street was full of the shouting of men. They split up in

excited cliques and groups.

"Play up, Notts!" the big man shouted.

"Plee up, Notts!" shouted the youths and men. They were at kindling pitch. It only needed a shout to rouse them. Of this the careful authorities were aware.

"I'm goin', I'm goin'!" shouted the sick man at his window.

Lucy came running upstairs.

"I'm goin' ter see Notts play Villa on th' Meadows ground," he declared.

"You--you can't go. There are no trains. You can't walk nine miles."

"I'm goin' ter see th' match," he declared, rising.

"You know you can't. Sit down now an' be quiet."

She put her hand on him. He shook it off.

"Leave me alone, leave me alone. It's thee as ma'es th' peen come, it's thee. I'm goin' ter Nottingham to see th' football match."

"Sit down--folks'll hear you, and what will they think?"

"Come off'n me. Com' off. It's her, it's her as does it. Com' off."

He seized hold of her. His little head was bristling with madness, and he was strong as a lion.

"Oh, Willy!" she cried.

"It's 'er, it's 'er. Kill her!" he shouted, "kill her."

"Willy, folks'll hear you."

"Th' peen's commin' on again, I tell yer. I'll kill her for it."

He was completely out of his mind. She struggled with him to prevent his going to the stairs. When she

escaped from him, he was shouting and raving, she beckoned to her neighbour, a girl of twenty-four, who was cleaning the window across the road.

Ethel Mellor was the daughter of a well-to-do check-weighman. She ran across in fear to Mrs Horsepool.

Hearing the man raving, people were running out in the street and listening. Ethel hurried upstairs. Everything was clean and pretty in the young home.

Willy was staggering round the room, after the slowly retreating Lucy, shouting:

"Kill her! Kill her!"

"Mr Horsepool!" cried Ethel, leaning against the bed, white as the sheets, and trembling. "Whatever are you saying?"

"I tell yer it's 'er fault as th' peen comes on--I tell yer it is! Kill 'er--kill 'er!"

"Kill Mrs Horsepool!" cried the trembling girl. "Why, you're ever so fond of her, you know you are."

"The peen--I ha'e such a lot o' peen--I want to kill 'er."

He was subsiding. When he sat down his wife collapsed in a chair, weeping noiselessly. The tears ran down Ethel's face. He sat staring out of the window; then the old, hurt look came on his face.

"What 'ave I been sayin'?" he asked, looking piteously at his wife.

"Why!" said Ethel, "you've been carrying on something awful, saying, 'Kill her, kill her!'"

"Have I, Lucy?" he faltered.

"You didn't know what you was saying," said his young wife gently but coldly.

His face puckered up. He bit his lip, then broke into tears, sobbing uncontrollably, with his face to the window.

There was no sound in the room but of three people crying bitterly, breath caught in sobs. Suddenly Lucy put away her tears and went over to him.

"You didn't know what you was sayin', Willy, I know you didn't. I knew you didn't, all the time. It doesn't

matter, Willy. Only don't do it again."

In a little while, when they were calmer, she went downstairs with Ethel.

"See if anybody is looking in the street," she said.

Ethel went into the parlour and peeped through the curtains.

"Aye!" she said. "You may back your life Lena an' Mrs Severn'll be out gorging, and that clat-fartin' Mrs

Allsop."

"Oh, I hope they haven't heard anything! If it gets about as he's out of his mind, they'll stop his compensation, I know they will."

"They'd never stop his compensation for that," protested Ethel.

"Well, they have been stopping some--"

"It'll not get about. I s'll tell nobody."

"Oh, but if it does, whatever shall we do? . . ."

THE END.